

On a Man's Writing

retained by him who has possessed it,
has seen it all to this moment depart,
and can never recall it.

To write memoirs of many years, as twenty, thirty, or forty, seems, at the first glance, a very onerous, task. To reap the products of so many acres of earth indeed might, *to one person, be an undertaking of mighty toil. But the materials of any value that all past life can supply to a recording pen, would be reduced by a discerning selection to a very small and modest amount. Would as much as one page of moderate size be deemed by any man's self-importance to be due, on an average, to each of the days that he has lived? (No man would judge more than one in ten thousand of all his thoughts, sayings, and actions, worthy to be mentioned if memory were capable of recalling them.) Necessarily a very large portion of what has occupied the successive years of life was of a kind to be utterly useless for a history of it; being merely for the accommodation of the time. Perhaps in the space of forty or fifty years, millions of sentences are proper to be uttered, and many thousands of affairs requisite to be transacted, or of journeys to be performed, which it would be ridiculous to record. They are a kind of material for the common expenditure and waste of the day. Yet it is often by a detail of this subordinate economy of life that the works of fiction, the narratives of age, the journals of travellers, and even grave biographical accounts, are made so unreasonably long. As well might a chronicle of the coats that a man has worn, with the colour and date of each, be called his life, for any important uses of relating its history. As well might a man, of whom I inquire the dimensions, the internal divisions, and the use of some remarkable building, begin to tell me how much wood was employed in the scaffolding, where the mortar was prepared, or how often it rained while the work was proceeding.

But, in a deliberate review of all that we can remember of past life, it will be possible to select a certain proportion which may with the most propriety be regarded as the history of the man. What I am recommending is, to follow the

* An exception may be admitted for the few individuals whose daily liberations, discourses and proceedings, ^I *ie interest* of mankind a grand scale.